

TESTIMONY OF

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On behalf of

THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

Before the

**HOUSE TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE SUBCOMMITTEES ON
WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT, and**

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT**

On

“A Vision and Strategy for Rebuilding New Orleans”

October 18, 2005

Chairman Shuster, Chairman Duncan and distinguished members of both subcommittees, thank you for hosting this hearing. I appreciate having the opportunity to speak on such an important topic and one that is central to my profession and my passion.

I am Paul Farmer, Executive Director of the American Planning Association (APA). On behalf of APA, we appreciate having this opportunity to discuss post-disaster recovery efforts in New Orleans and their inherent relationship to planning and policymaking.

I appear today both as CEO of the nation's oldest and largest association dedicated to the promotion of good planning that creates communities of lasting value, and as a professional planner having served cities as varied, interesting, and challenging as Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Eugene, Oregon. I first learned of city planning as a high school student in Shreveport, Louisiana, where I was fascinated by changes in my city. This was when I learned that a profession existed that was dedicated to improving choices for our communities and bettering peoples' lives.

APA represents 38,000 professional planners, planning commissioners, and engaged citizens interested in shaping the vision for the future of their communities. Our members are involved, in the private sector and at all levels of government, in formulating and implementing plans that engage citizens in a thoughtful and careful process designed to create a blueprint for the future. These plans reflect local values, promote wise stewardship of resources, increase choices for how we work, live and play, and enhance local quality of life.

I am pleased to see so many people here today representing the backbone of New Orleans' economic, social and political successes. Our discussion will be critical to advancing sound policies for rebuilding communities of lasting value in the affected region. I think it's a good sign that we already have two subcommittees working together here today. Your oversight of FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers and other key emergency relief and community protection agencies is noteworthy and vital to all of our

work. This rebuilding effort is going to take a lot of collaboration, both on Capitol Hill and on the ground in Louisiana.

Hurricane Katrina and subsequent flooding was among the greatest urban and regional disasters in U.S. history. The disaster was soon made worse by Hurricane Rita. The rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast will involve the largest and most complex planning effort in our lifetime. It will involve substantial analysis and public debate regarding trade-offs between idealistic goals and expediency. It will include some of the most difficult planning issues of our time – environmental justice, racial equity, restoration of natural systems, infrastructure repair, property acquisition and condemnation, environmental clean-up, cultural heritage preservation, hazard mitigation, economic development and urban redevelopment – all at a scale never before seen.

I'd like to talk today about the importance of the planning profession and the planning process, particularly as they relate to post-disaster recovery efforts. I will discuss the fundamentals of comprehensive, long-term planning, how these principles can be applied and integrated effectively in New Orleans, what APA is doing to help on the ground and institutionally, and finally our views on the role of the federal government in this coordinated effort and recommendations moving forward.

The Value of Comprehensive Planning and Public Participation

Planning and the special skills of planners are used to help diverse groups find common ground and mutually agreeable solutions to community issues. Planning is the way communities bring elected officials, constituents and other interests together to define and implement a plan based on shared goals and values.

Planning provides a way for engaged citizens to exercise their voice about how they want their community rebuilt. In this way, planning is just as valuable to a healthy democracy as voting privileges. No other public process enables citizens to become so directly involved in helping shape the future of the places where they live. Planning is truly democracy in action. Part of this democratic process involves residents, development

interests and other stakeholders coming together to create a shared vision of their community's future.

Rebuilding at this magnitude must be a collaborated effort among the community, state and the federal government. The goal is to rebuild communities that are safe, and to give residents choices on where to live and work. Given the significant changes happening in our cities and the changes portended by many studies and indicators, planning is more vital than ever as a tool for informed municipal decision-making.

Planning decisions are among the most essential local government responsibilities. Planning affects the lives of every citizen in a community. Local involvement and control are essential to maintaining public trust and accountability. Planning in New Orleans should make full use of existing local bodies and institutions. The federal government, APA, and other institutions can provide technical assistance and new tools to replace lost local capacity, but working within the structure of the local planning commission and regional metropolitan planning organization is vital to a sound redevelopment plan that reflects local values.

Planners are trained to examine a situation and provide a comprehensive perspective. This viewpoint enables planners to identify both intended and unintended consequences of growth and change. Planning is, at its core, about managing change in a way that engages citizens, reflects their vision, and results in increased value.

Communities cannot afford to forgo good planning in the rush to rebuild. Now is the time to consider all of the planning questions to ensure communities of lasting value are rebuilt. Planners are vital resources to devastated communities to help assess risk, rebuild safely and reduce vulnerability to man-made or natural hazards. Planners help communities see the big picture and take a long-term approach to guiding growth and change.

Every resident must have a voice in the rebuilding process. This will take coordination of community town halls and meetings to an unprecedented level given the geographic dispersion of residents. Community involvement will be a challenge, but one that cannot be ignored. To truly rebuild communities of lasting value, residents, business interests and elected officials must make decisions about their community together.

Investments of time, talent, creativity and, of course, money, are central to a city's success. Engaging the business community will be particularly important for New Orleans, and good planning is what ultimately drives investor confidence. Good planning is what ultimately drives investor confidence. Good planning is what investors need to feel confident that their work will be rewarded, not undermined.

Rebuilding levees only to pre-Katrina standards is unlikely to instill investor confidence. The levees failed. The types of levees must also be reconsidered, with earthen levees possibly replacing the highway-type walls that failed along the canals. Yes, government must be prepared to use the tool of eminent domain. Some property will have to be acquired for any property to have value and for lives to be protected. We must also begin to implement the Coast 2050 Plan and restore our wetlands.

Great communities don't occur overnight or by accident. They are planned and thought out. They involve commitment, collaboration, and civic participation. They encourage inclusiveness and opportunity for all, not just a few. APA celebrates and advocates engagement because good ideas come about when many people participate. No great community is ever the result of one person or a small group of people.

A Multi-Faceted Approach is Necessary

The key to rebuilding the devastated regions requires a multi-faceted approach. This means considering the environmental issues, assessing the potential for risk, implementing disaster mitigation plans, engaging in participatory planning practices and supporting good planning decisions.

We cannot forgo good planning in the rush to rebuild. Rushing the rebuilding process will only place communities at greater risk. Rebuilding must be done carefully, expedited at a speed that will bring residents safely home. Above all, the rebuilding process must maintain the unique fabric and culture of the region.

Urgency in the response and rebuilding after the hurricanes must be balanced with informed decisions. The best examples of past studies, good planning, and the lessons of history must be utilized, so that the same environmental and rebuilding errors will not take place. Regulatory and environmental processes must not be bypassed in the name of expediency; the building and infrastructure review process, however, must expedite priority projects that will help everyone.

We cannot afford to ignore the lessons Hurricane Katrina has taught. Ignoring the potential for risk is dangerous for our communities. Now is the time to assess community vulnerabilities to man-made and natural hazards and simultaneously implement disaster mitigation plans to reduce those risks while rebuilding. Let's put the planning tools available to good use to build solid foundations for these communities. Effective disaster prevention, response and mitigation measures can occur only with adequate and effective investment in infrastructure for all our communities and for this specific region.

What is rebuilt, where rebuilding occurs and what standards should be used are challenging questions. What not to build is equally important. Opportunities abound. As just one example, schools can be brought back to life as true centers of community serving all residents seven days a week. From the planning perspective, these decisions must involve the local citizens – the people who lived in the area prior to the hurricane, the housing community, the business community, the energy sector, folks with expertise in environmental planning as well as the state and local governments – as they decide where best to relocate schools, homes, transit routes, highways and corridors.

Public open spaces, too, can be enhanced. I think that far too often we start with the hard infrastructure and deciding where we are going to put the roads and the freeways and the

overpasses and things of that nature. That's important, but I think that the civic spaces of where people come together are extremely important in any city, and those should not be added on after the fact.

I was planning director of Minneapolis for many years, and a hundred years ago some very wise people in Minneapolis decided that the diagram that was to define that city was going to be along where the chain of lakes would be forever public, and so all the lands around the lakes and Minnehaha Creek and much of the Mississippi River is all public. This gives me reason to believe there's room for revisioning New Orleans while still respecting its history.

A key element of any comprehensive planning effort includes building or maintaining an area's unique sense of history and culture. Part of the reason New Orleans and its surrounding region have attracted so many tourists over the years is thanks, in large part, to its strong historical and cultural influences. People want to experience the rich culture of French, Southern and Creole heritage; they want to taste the generation-old recipes for local food, hear the legendary zydeco and jazz musicians, see the local artists and their artwork throughout the city and be surrounded by the intricate iron work and diverse architecture.

Historic preservation and building rehabilitation are an essential part of the redevelopment of New Orleans. More here than in most any city in the nation, historic structures are a critical part of both culture and economy. We should use New Orleans as a laboratory of innovation in these areas by expanding traditional rehabilitation tax credits to spur reuse of vital structures in the city. Additionally, we should include a residential historic tax credit for New Orleans homeowners to assist in rebuilding in a way that preserves the vitality of existing neighborhoods.

As we talk about this, we cannot forget the intellectual capital of the local population. One of the most effective ways to respect traditional community character is by acknowledging the value of "social infrastructure" in the area. Open, transparent and

participatory planning is critical to rebuilding social networks that are stronger and more inclusive than before.

We must also look at lessons we have learned elsewhere. Florida has shown how regional coordination of local decisions can be effective in post-disaster recovery. Florida has also demonstrated the value of mandated comprehensive plans with the force of law. My home state would do well to heed this lesson.

APA Involvement

Now is the time to help shape these immediate and long-term planning processes, because they will be affected by decisions made over the next few weeks and months. We are focused on building planning capacity to address immediate rebuilding needs, and assist other communities with disaster preparedness planning. Consideration must be given to temporary solutions so they do not become permanent bad decisions.

It is important to recognize that our colleagues in Louisiana will require assistance from external sources, because their community and personal resources are severely depleted at a time when they are most needed by their communities.

In response to this challenge APA has posted numerous resources available online to help guide the rebuilding process, including model plans, planning tools, sample ordinances and lessons learned from other natural disasters. In addition, APA immediately launched a series of initiatives, including providing news media with contact names of members knowledgeable about disaster recovery, organizing a special Katrina recovery workshop at the Louisiana state chapter annual meeting, issuing an edition of our electronic publication *interact* focused on what planners can do within their own reach to help speed recovery, arranging a nationwide audio/web recovery conference for our members, and creating a Katrina section of the web with many educational resources made available.

At APA's National Planning Conference in San Antonio in April 2006, we will host a conference session track on disaster recovery to educate attendees about the issues

involved. Since Texas has absorbed so many evacuees, we also will host an all-day workshop on Saturday addressing the issues of disaster recovery and rebuilding.

We will use all existing APA opportunities, conferences and venues to focus on these issues, and to articulate how our members can be involved on a personal basis and help build the capacity for planning.

APA will send a team of planners to New Orleans to focus on rebuilding the city's planning capacity. Elsewhere in the Gulf Coast, Planning Assistance Teams will work with the impacted communities, offering their assistance, expertise and knowledge. The experts will help community leaders address a variety of planning, rebuilding, hazard mitigation, and other needs. Many of our members have experienced floods, wildfires, earthquakes and other disasters and can offer valuable assistance to their colleagues and communities in these states.

Obviously, the New Orleans planning function today and in the future is very different from the function before Hurricane Katrina. Local implementation will follow as determined by local officials. Local involvement will be inclusive and extensive.

The team will assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges associated with the city's planning function as it existed before the disaster, and assess the capacity of current resources for city planning. They will consider the coordination of planning activities within city government, and between city government and local institutions, such as schools, universities, and hospitals, look at the unique challenges that New Orleans now faces and the extent to which those challenges might call for nontraditional solutions in order to assure a strong and effective planning function.

The team will prepare a business plan for the city's planning department, including budget and staffing recommendations, so as to assure a planning function that is comprehensive in scope, and can assist city staff as they begin to implement this plan.

The team may also prepare policies and procedures for development review, including land use regulation, permitting, and inspections, and provide general recommendations

on major policy issues, such as the city's comprehensive plan, floodplain management, urban design, environmental justice, and citizen participation.

The Federal Role and Policy Recommendations

APA exercises planning leadership and helps communities have more choices through our federal policy initiatives and public outreach efforts. These activities address a wide range of issues, including transportation spending, energy conservation, environmental protections, housing and economic development.

The rebuilding effort in New Orleans will require support for data collection and analysis, including mechanisms for sharing of data resources among agencies, as well as adequate staffing of municipal, regional, state, and federal planning institutions. We must also develop technical materials and training programs that build local and regional capacity to engage in informed deliberations, and the development of a range of communication media, in order to ensure participation by all stakeholders, including displaced residents. The federal government must continue to work and collaborate with experienced planners in affected areas.

It is clear that now is no time for a 'business as usual' approach from government. The residents of New Orleans face enormous challenges and government must be a catalyst for redevelopment, not an obstacle. However, a blanket approach to waiving rules and regulations is equally perilous for a sustainable future in New Orleans. The key in my opinion is to link together an effective planning process with opportunities for regulatory relief.

We should allow for exceptions to certain procedures provided that the result is consistent with a locally-driven plan. Likewise, the underlying local land use regulations and relevant development codes should be consistent with the comprehensive redevelopment plan. These processes must work together seamlessly or else we risk a patchwork approach to redevelopment.

The members of this committee know better than anyone the vital role of transportation in building and sustaining communities. Transportation will be a key part of the redevelopment of New Orleans and federal response in this area is needed. FTA is to be congratulated for immediately stepping in and providing operating subsidies to local transit agencies to restore service. The lack of viable mobility options for many residents helped contribute to the magnitude of the crisis. Our federal response and local redevelopment planning should work to actively promote mode choice and mobility in New Orleans.

Because transportation issues are so important, additional support should be provided to the local Metropolitan Planning Organization and transit authority to not only resume full service, but also to examine regional transportation problems exposed by the disaster, including protecting critical infrastructure and expanding transit options.

Temporary housing must be built as part of the long-term redevelopment of communities, so that people who do return can, as much as possible, begin to live and recover with their neighbors. Public funding must be provided for neighborhood and community planners to assist residents in planning and financing their reconstruction, to provide an opportunity to develop creative strategies for neighborhood improvement and evacuee community building, and to provide a communication link between local government and residents.

Reducing or eliminating potential risks for natural hazards must be factored into the rebuilding process to make communities safer. We encourage the federal government to become a stronger partner in promoting safe growth. Effective disaster prevention, response and mitigation measures can occur only with adequate and effective investment in infrastructure for all our communities and for this specific region.

Some areas of federal involvement are straightforward. FEMA must continue to improve its efforts at disaster mitigation, not just disaster response. The agency has made great strides in this area but more remains to be done. APA supports Pre-Disaster Mitigation

grants (PDM) implemented by state and local governments to fund preventative measures that protect property and save lives. We also support the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) formula for states with Enhanced Mitigation Plans at 20% of disaster costs. Additionally, we encourage the federal government to restore the regular HMGP program to its 15% level. Reduced federal funding means a lost opportunity for communities and localities to act as partners and make positive use of the interest generated during the post-disaster period to reduce the costs of future catastrophes.

In addition to those obvious efforts, there is a range of innovative policies that Congress should consider. The federal government is the most important source of geographic and remotely sensed data. These information sources are vital to GIS systems and new scenario planning technologies. These technological tools can play a critical role at the local level in improving mitigation strategies and incorporating safety in the comprehensive planning process.

Although many data are available and tremendous advances have been made in technology, there's more work to do. APA will call on Congress to consider options to support planning for community safety. Among the key components of such a program would be bolstering federal data collection, establishing support for local code reform, promoting security planning, and assisting communities with the acquisition and implementation of new technologies for security planning. The 'Safe Communities Act of 2005' (H.R. 3524) goes a long way in addressing the need for disaster preparedness and mitigation strategies through grants to local planning authorities.

Lastly, I would suggest that Congress provide new support for expanding community planning capacity. While GIS systems and scenario planning are becoming more commonplace, there are vast disparities in access to this technology and training in its full implementation. Promoting better planning and improving local planning capacity through technical assistance and other incentives does not mean intruding on the traditional deference given to localities in planning. Rather it would make other federal programs more effective and improve local policy making. Good planning stretches the dollars.

You know, I was just down in my hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana for APA's annual chapter conference there. The title of the special conference, "Planning for Prosperity: Opportunities in Post Katrina Louisiana" speaks volumes for the local attitude in that region and also of the great opportunity and responsibility that we all have right now. We, as planners, lawmakers, business leaders, and private and public sector professionals have the chance to rebuild New Orleans in a manner that creates real prosperity. We can help ensure that communities of lasting value are the end result of this nationwide effort.

I believe that working together, with a comprehensive vision for the area, we can create a city of economic, social and political prosperity and long-term success. This isn't about a quick fix. Our efforts are sure to leave a lasting and permanent effect. This is precisely why we need to go about this rebuilding process systematically and comprehensively, all the while incorporating the voices and needs of the local community. The rebuilding process requires ongoing participatory planning that involves all community members, regardless of their current location.

Planners have historically been at the forefront of designing places and standards that ensure safety while bolstering vitality and a sense of community. It's a balancing act. We stand ready to continue playing that important role in the face of new challenges that confront our communities. APA will continue to dedicate resources to assist in an effort that must be commensurate with the challenges and opportunities presented by this unprecedented disaster.

Our annual conference draws 5,000 to 6,000 people. You're invited to join us at our upcoming conference in New Orleans in 2010. Thank you.